DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 594 CS 203 907

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TITLE Collaborative Writing Games.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 9p.; Study prepared at University College, London

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Games; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); Connected Discourse; Paragraph Composition; Secondary Education; Small Group Instruction; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Collaboration

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a classroom game designed to help students overcome their fear of writing. Two classes of top- and middle-ability adolescents were divided into pairs to work on a single composition. After the teacher proposed the initial sentence, the partners took turns writing sentences to complete the story. Although the collaborative stories compared well with the stories written by individuals, the paper stresses that the positive student reaction is the most important aspect of this project. Student comments and examples of the finished stories are included. (HAI)

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COLLABORATIVE WRITING GAMES

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We describe a technique for helping children to write with enjoyment, and a preliminary investigation of it.

Two general points are important. First, it has become a commonplace to argue that standards of writing have declined at every level of education. Second, very little basic psychological research has been done on writing compared with the vast amount devoted to reading. These two assertions indicate a large gap in our knowledge which needs to be filled. But why has so little been done? The answer is that writers often claim that writing is an art unamenable to psychological research, and (in any case) it is exceptionally difficult to analyse such an elusive product, even with the elaborate skills of the theoretical linguist. In research on reading there is an input (a text) against which an output (performance) can be compared, but there is no measurable input for writing. In spite of these limitations, it seems to us urgent that some attempt be made to do research on the putative difficulty of writing, not only for utilitarian reasons, but because it is a creative activity which should be open to all literate individuals.

Examiners usually agree that a particular script is "badly written" (it fails to communicate), and that another is "well written" (even if they cannot describe its merit). Similarly, we probably have some friends who enjoy writing, and some who positively dislike it. For those who do enjoy it, its function is more than the production of a permanent record, or the communication of thought: the activity of writing generates new ideas, and recreates experience in a unified form. Conversely, those who have difficulty find that writing inhibits the production of ideas which they might otherwise entertain, and that the result of their efforts is painfully unsatisfactory. In our experience, many research students may be able to talk about their thoughts, but when they write them down the meaning is often totally obscured, and they may not always be aware of the obscurity. If these observations have any generality, it would follow that an attempt should be made to enable children to overcome the fear of writing and to learn that it can be intrinsically satisfying.

One way of doing this is to get two children to share in the writing of one text, and so we asked pairs of children to write down alternate sentences to construct a story. This is rather like the party game in which children take turns in speaking sentences to make a story. But that game (as far as we know) has not been investigated psychologically; our adaptation of it for the study of writing is intended to be more consequential. Each sentence (apart from the first) is written to fulfil an obligation to a partner engaged in a common task. Our central question was how such texts would compete in merit with those written by individual children of the same age.

The study was conducted in a Comprehensive School. Two classes of top and middle band ability (29 boys and 30 girls), ranging in age from 13.75 to 15.25 years (mean = 14.27), participated. Each class had its own English teacher who conducted the investigation during normal class time. The pupils were selected at random for either collaborative or individual writing; and within the collaborative groups the composition of the pairs was also determined randomly. The class of top band ability consisted of 10 pairs and nine individuals, and the class of middle band ability consisted of 10 pairs and 10 individuals.

In each class the collaborative pairs were instructed to write a story which should appear, as far as possible, to be written by an individual. The teacher proposed the following initial sentence: "Before me the road stretched endlessly into the distance." The pairs were told to use one piece of paper which, after each sentence had been written, was passed across the room to the appropriate partner. The individuals were simply instructed to write the story in the ordinary way. Four other teachers of English in the same school agreed to act as independent "judges", and were instructed to put all the scripts into rank order according to the criteria they would normally use in marking, i.e. general literary merit. For this purpose the scripts were typed, so that the judges, who were unaware of the experiment, would also be unaware of the conditions under which the scripts had been written. The extent of agreement about the scripts between the four judges revealed wide discrepancies and so we did not use an average ranking as a measure, but determined how often the rankings of the four judges distinguished collaborative from

individual scripts. In the top ability band, collaborative scripts occurred 36.1 per cent of the time in the upper half of the ranks, i.e. on 13 out of 36 (4 x 9) possible occasions. However, in the middle ability band such scripts occurred 55.6 per cent of the time in the upper half, i.e. on 20 out of 36 possible occasions. We can infer from these data that collaborative scripts, in general, compare reasonably well with scripts written by individuals, and that the collaborative technique even appears to benefit children who have been assessed as less able.

But the comments of the children are more revealing than these bare figures suggest. The teacher of the middle ability band told us that one pair said "they could go on writing for ever" although some " did not like having to alter their train of thought." In the upper ability band the comments were written down and sent to us by the teacher. The majority stressed the fun of writing together, but several comments were more specific. They strongly suggested that collaboration elicited both the willingness and the reluctance to share the point of view of the partner. Some pairs were able to think in the same way, and adapt to each other's thought:

> "All you have to do is to read what has been written and write what would naturally follow. It needs a bit of give and take on both sides because to get a sensible story it can't be split both ways into two ideas. You have to put yourself in the position of the other person and think what they would think."

> "I thought the idea of two people writing a story was very interesting, and when I set out to write it, I found the boy who was my partner had really good ideas, that seemed to carry on mine, and made the story fascinating."

> "I thought it was much better to write in pairs as I found I could write things that I would never have thought of before. Writing in pairs makes you more inventive as you need to carry on a story from a sentence you weren't thinking of."

"I was surprised to find how easy this was. My partner, who just happens to be my friend, seemed to be on the same lines as me and we seemed to know what we were going on about."

Some comments revealed competitive motives:

"The essays written by two people would tend to be two different stories joined together, because each person would want his idea to be the main theme."

"I thought their (sic) was a tendence to write a comical story and get your partner into a difficult spot so it was not really worth while."

"There would be revalry (sic) between the writers (e.g. get out of that)."

"People tried to take control of the story ... I had savalaged (sic) her story." (A Joycean compromise between "salvaged" and "sabotaged"?)

Others were complaints about the behaviour of a partner. Yet the conflict was overcome, to some extent, by the need to make a comprehensible story. Some comments suggest that one partner may adopt the role of a disruptive agent, producing divergent ideas, and the other exerting a controlling, or executive, role:

"He had a very strong desire to write totally irrelevant and ridiculous sentences which also gave me a very difficult task to overcome his and make them fairly relevant."

"I would try and back him up with what he said and add an idea of my own. When the paper was handed back to me it was as though he hadn't seen what I'd written and he just wrote something else. He completely ignored these and just wrote something irrelevant."

"I thought writing that essay in pairs was more like a fight ... one thing I found myself doing was using words that I would never use in my own essay ... I think it is good to write in pairs because you get two different styles of writing that blend together."

One comment, strongly suggestive of the poetic style of R.D. Laing, seems to epitomize the experience of an individual writer who struggles to write down what he wants to say, and yet finds it makes no sense when others read it back to him:

"I seemed to know what she would write, or thought I did, so I tried to write what I thought she was thinking of, but she in turn did this, and neither followed right."

A further comment suggested how the initial anxiety, suffered by a writer on his first draft, might be alleviated by a collaborative technique in which the responsibility of getting words down on paper can be shared:

"In pairs you didn't have to think of an idea - you just thought it up as you went along as it could change."

The following scripts were both written in pairs in the top ability band. The first received the highest average ranking of all the scripts, whether collaborative or individual. It shows how a cohesive story may be devised without sacrificing inventiveness or originality:

Before me the road stretched endlessly into the distance. All I could see was sand and dust stretching to a blazing infinity. The sun was beating down onto my head and my mouth was dry and parched. It was now that I wished I had never started this silly expedition. If only I'd listened to the warnings, the advice they'd all given me.

I began to trek down the path, the hot sand burning my blistered feet as they sank into the dusty surface. "Don't be stupid, you can't do it alone, and if we don't hear from you we'll never be able to find you, it's not possible" these warnings ticked over and over in my mind. Oh! where was it, that majestic looking "tomb" I had seen in the book, it had to be here, it just "<u>had</u>" to.

I was getting desperate, I'd now only a tin of peas and a bar of chocolate left. What was more, my eyes were being weakened by the sun, would I reach the pyramid before I went blind? Or worse before I ... died ...? Even if I did get there how the hell was I going to make it all the way back. Questions ran through my mind, confusing me till I did not no where I was, or where I should have been, if I didn't have water soon I'd go mad.

It was no use, I sat down once again and pulled the old map from my jacket pocket, I once more looked longingly at the horizon. The sun seemed to lessen its rays for a moment, (as if a miracle had occurred) and I saw far in the distance the looming majestic shape of the "Khan" pyramid. Could it be, could it really be the "Khan" pyramid, or was it once more only a mirage. Now, with the hope renewed inside me, I seemed to be pushed forward, running with all the vitality of one who is perfectly fit.

I had to get there, even if I rotted by it, I had to reach the tomb. With one last effort I hurled myself forward and collapsed headlong in the sand, reaching before me as I fell. It wasn't far now, I had to get there, I thought that if I somehow reached the tomb my energy would be renewed. On the last crawling movement, my hand outstretched as before, I felt the cold, clammy wall of ... the Pyramid!

I must have fainted, as the next thing I knew, it was dark, but I wasn't outside I was in the tomb. I'd reached it, my expedition was over!

The second is much more disjointed and suggests that the game was taken less seriously:

Before me the road stretched endlessly into the distance. I looked at ralph my dog and started walking. The sun could only just be seen, spreading the first rays of light, over the peak of the mountain.

The sound of a railway engine filled the air so I new I was somewhere near the Trans-Siberian railway. This must have been where it cut through the numerous areas of stepp-land - so common in the part of Russia.

I smelt the diseal fumes from the engine and it reminded me of the furious battle being fought in St. Petersburg. Ralph barked at me, having heard the noise of the engine, and ran off the road into the forest that surrounded us on both sides. I rushed after him but just when I got into the forest I saw a chinese Pygmy. The pigmy looked at me, probably wondering what I was doing in this remote area, and then squealed with fright as Ralph jumped up his legs. Just then a poisoned dart whistled

past and hit Ralph in the back of the neck, he died instantly. Instinctively I ran towards him, only to trip of a protruding root and watch another dart whistle over my head.

I lay there stunned when a twisted face of a Outer Mongolian rifleman stuck his pistol to my forehead I waited terrified.

"P-Please", I pleaded, in the best Russian I knew, "my dog meant no harm - he was merely excited; I have nothing to do with the pigmy either." The rifleman spoke, "these pigmys have been terrorising our pigs and killing the rabits we feed on.

"So I have heard", I replied, "you see, I travel around these part, but ... I have no home and my dog was the only friend I had." "Never mind you will have plenty of friends where you are going".

"Where's that?" I queried, somewhat surprised. He paused pulled up his rifle to his shoulder and laughed. "You will soon find out." He pointed his rifle towards the forest. He spun round and shot me in the leg I screamed and fainted.

As we have stressed, the collaborative technique sustains a narrative, but it is hardly conducive to an individuality of expression such as we found in some individual scripts:

Everything silent but not still. The trees ruffled but did hardly seem to make a sound. The frequent movement of cars could be heard in the distance. The atmosphere gloomy and cold.

Some of the people around our area had gone on holiday for the weekend trying to get away from the hardships of life. As for the insects ... nobody knew why they were swarming around.

This was the shortest of all the scripts (66 words), the shortest collaborative script being 208 words. Written by a child in the middle ability band, it stands in contrast with some of the less successful, rambling stories produced in collaboration. It might be taken as indicative of the difficulty in developing a theme, or it might be taken simply as poetic expression. This script (not surprisingly) produced strong disagreement among the judges. Their rankings of it were 6, 15, 20 and unranked by one judge, who assumed part of the script was missing.

A similar type of script, written by a child in the top ability band, was evidently also controversial with respect to merit; its rankings were

1, 5, 15, 17:

> Before me, the road stretched endlessly into the distance. Light was my path. I was led by light, and light was my life. Orange, Green, anything, just as long as it was light, neon light. My world was slipping fast away from me. Darkness was my main fear, a fear of the unknown. An endless trip through light.
>
> The road was thinning, as was the course of my life, thinning to a trickle that ran through the endless expanse of time. My life was like that trickle, I had to follow it, I was bound to it. On and on through past, present and future, and all the way, life seemed to get more and more futile. The light was still there, the light of my life. My hope, the endless hope. My mind was blank. My thoughts no longer functioned, except on the burning light that stunned my eyes into oblivion.
>
> The light was gently fading as was my vain hope. Time was ageing and growing strangely dim. My time was closing! My known became my unknown, and vice versa. My fear was no longer darkness, but my thought.
>
> The end of the trickle was like an oasis in the desert. Darkness enveloped me and my time was gone.

These examples illustrate both the potentialities and the limitations of collaboration. Its game-like quality, and the sense of fun it sometimes arouses, might enable individuals to overcome the anxiety of writing. But equally clearly, it cannot induce the disciplined attention needed for mature writing — indeed, it would militate against it. Its use is primarily therapeutic in the sense that sharing in an activity, whether it induces co-operation or conflict, would be expected to overcome that inhibition and feeling of blankness which writers often report. And its comic element might diminish that sense of the serious attached to so much "work".

The technique of writing alternate sentences may seem too artificial to count as "collaboration" but it does seem in many cases to help the adolescent to move from "egocentric thought." Concentrating on what the other person has just written may result in what Piaget calls "decentering", expressed so well by some of our participants: "I found I could write things I would never have thought of before ... ", and ". . . using words that I would never use in my own essay."